STEPPING BACK FROM LIFE

March 1, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Scripture
Exodus 24:12-18
Matthew 4:1-11

"Then Jesus was led up by the spirit into the wilderness...."
Matthew 4:1 (RSV)

My proposal this morning is that we accept an invitation to step back from life. I propose that we allow God's spirit to lead us to a place of quiet and solitude, where we can get some important work done.

My sense of it is that it is neither easy nor convenient for us to step back from life. My sense is that we work hard at the opposite of the invitation...that we are "into" life, noisily, busily...that in all of Christendom, this congregation, this morning - is one of the least likely to take comfortably to contemplation, meditation, reflection.

I propose that we get into the topic by listening to two statements from the text, the story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness...one at the beginning: the other at the end. We are so busy ordinarily trying to understand what those temptations are about that we miss what may be the most important part of the story, and the part - this morning - I am proposing contains God's word to us.

The first statement is - "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted..."

The second is, at the end... "Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him."

Let me tell you first about how this story has been expressed in a peculiar but fascinating chapter of history. One time, very long ago, a young man heard this story, and others like it and did a very strange thing. He went into the wilderness and stayed there for twenty years. His name was Anthony, St. Anthony; he lived in Egypt in the Third Century and he is the founder of that fascinating Christian phenomenon called Monasticism. At the age of 35 Anthony crossed the Nile, went into the desert where he lived in an abandoned fort. Bread was brought to him twice a year. He emerged 20 years later, "perfect in every way," it was said, fit, alert and utterly close to God. By the time of his death Anthony had thousands of followers. Some of these early monks lived as hermits, absolutely alone. Others lived in communities called monasteries. They

lived simply, but strenuously. They prayed and meditated constantly. Church historians know these early monastics by the affectionate title "Desert Fathers"... there were women too, of course. The passing of time has rendered them obscure. Western civilization does worse by them. They seem to us slightly bizarre, eccentric, perhaps even mad.

And yet, when being a Christian has become so conventional, these eccentrics have a certain appeal. And in a society which has abandoned any sense of the holy, where it is only rumored that God is alive and well, these people who lived life wholly for God have a word which something in us wants to hear. Perhaps these peculiar people knew something about God and about authentic human life which we have quite forgotten.

St. Matthew suggests that one time the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. That story about Jesus spending 40 days in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry is ordinarily associated with the beginning of the Lenten season. The 40 days of Lent relate to those 40 days in the wilderness. And the ideas of sacrifice, self denial and repentance which have characterized the observance of Lent are related to that time and that experience of our Lord's.

I am intrigued by the suggestion that the Spirit led Jesus there: that God set Jesus up for the experience.

The wilderness into which Jesus was led - and St. Anthony followed 250 years later - was a lonely, lifeless, arid desert: rocky, barren, windy... Israel wandered around in the wilderness for 40 years on the way to becoming a nation. The wilderness has a certain creative potential, that is to say. But on the way, it is also a place of struggle, temptation, mental, physical and spiritual refining.

Jesus had to decide how to live in light of his sense of God's purposes for his life. What happened to him in that 40 days in the wilderness was a process of refining. Presented with three alternative styles of being God's man, he pondered each and rejected each. Those three alternatives weren't all bad, by the way. In the story Satan is the protagonist and he is rather appealing, worldly-wise actually. His first proposal is that Jesus become relevant: "forget about those dusty prayer shawls and obscure rituals! Turn these rocks into bread!" The second suggestion is to do the PR first... "Get their attention by jumping off the temple. People don't listen to a voice crying in the wilderness. You need a little ink, a little 'sex appeal', the ad people call it." The third proposal is about power, clout. "What better way to bring in the Kingdom than to accumulate political influence?"

Jesus rejected each of those suggestions, not because they were evil or sinful in and of themselves. My sense of the story is that his selfhood, his soul was at stake. What is happening in the wilderness is a man struggling with demons for his own integrity. He must be God's man on God's terms. Nothing must interfere with that.

What interests me primarily about the story this morning, however, is that Jesus went into that wilderness in the first place. What I'd like very much for us to ponder is that the solitude of the wilderness was a

necessary experience for his own spiritual development. I am intrigued with St. Matthew's quiet reminder that the Spirit led him there, that the struggle which could only happen there was part of God's plan (and that at the end of it, Angels came and ministered to him). I am intrigued with the possibility that those peculiar desert monks and hermits who lived out their lives in solitude and silence understood something about this incident...and about life which we have quite forgotten.

The simple fact of the matter is that our life style is noisy and busy and fast. Visitors to our culture immediately see that we are in a hurry always; that we make the automatic assumption that empty time is wasted time, that each new day is to be attacked, charged, that life is a race - a sprint, or a battle to be fought. Several brokerages and banks use this idea to promote their business. In television commercials they tell us that their people can't sleep at night, are up before dawn, can't even finish lunch without rushing to a telephone.

These commercials make the pastor, the physician, the psychologist shudder. What they really are promoting are stress and indigestion, ulcers, heart attacks, depression, broken marriages and chemical addiction. What they suggest is that compulsive busyness will produce profitability which will produce happiness which is a synonym for salvation and what this text suggests is that to buy that is to sell your own soul.

We could spend our time thinking about how bankrupt that is. But you know that already. My guess is that part of the reason you are here and not somewhere else this morning is that you already know the theological deficiencies of the "fast track." I believe it is a matter of identity - soul, if you will. Just as Jesus had to be led into the wilderness - to find his own soul, so do we. The Spirit led him into the wilderness to do it. But we're too busy. Instead, we let the culture do the defining for us (tell us who we are - our soul). The culture defines us, simple and straight, in terms of function. "Who are you" here means "what do you do" answer the question literally. You're at a party and someone you have just met says: "What do you do?" And you answer: "Oh, I breathe, eat, sleep, love a lot. Sometimes I run. Occasionally I walk. I talk and think and read most days."

What we do for a living is important and interesting. What is wrong, however, is the cultural truism that who you are is limited by what you do. What is tragic is the notion that your value as a person is not indigenous to you, but has to be earned, posited, toted up every single day. What is demonis is that you must hammer out your worth as a human being every morning of your life. What is deadly is the logical conclusion that if you're not making it: if you're not living up to your own production quotas in life, all you need to do to feel better about yourself is tighten up a bit, dig in deeper, put your shoulder to the wheel a little more forcefully, get up earlier, work later. "When the going gets tough, the tough get going," and all that.

It doesn't work. It doesn't work because it is idolatry which always means a selling of your soul. Frantic, compulsive behavior apparently only produces frustration and weariness and then anger: anger at the unfairness of it all, deep rage which sometimes lashes out at spouse, lover, children,

colleagues. God even. John Ciardi wrote somewhere that "an ulcer is a poem that never got written and a heart attack sometimes a song which was never sung." And perhaps dying marriages are sometimes no more complicated than "I love you" not said, or love not made, and perhaps empty lives are sometimes no more complicated than laughter not laughed and prayers not prayed because of all things, we didn't have time: life was too noisy and full.

Compulsive busyness keeps us out of the wilderness. So does our fear of aloneness and silence. The wilderness is where you are alone with yourself. Our life is open, public, together. Under the guise of "sharing feelings" it sometimes seems that privacy is gone. There is no arena of life safe from the probing inquiries of the TV talk show host. In church even we assume that every religious experience, every joy, sorrow, doubt and belief must be shared to be authenticated. I was interested to learn that some of those desert hermits avoided talking about faith because they thought it released the religious emotion they needed - a little like keeping the window closed to keep the heat in.

Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen who writes about spirituality calls us the "chatty society." I love a whimsical observation Pascal once made. Said he, "all the evils of life have fallen upon us because man will not sit alone quietly in a room." [Leslie Weatherhead, The Significance of Silence, ch. 1] I also love Henry David Thoreau's comment about the huge Boston celebration at the completion of the telephone lines from Maine to Texas. Thoreau said, "The question is, do the people of Maine have anything to say to the people of Texas?" [Rollo May, My Search for Beauty, p. 199]

It is more than discomfort, I think. I believe that we are afraid of silence. The early settlers on the frontier used to beat pots and pans at night to scare away the beasts, real or imagined, that inhabited the primal wilderness. So do we. We avoid the silence and aloneness of solitude. We don't step back from life because we're uncomfortable, afraid even.

My proposal this morning is that we need to go into the wilderness. My proposal is that we need to allow the Spirit of God to lead us into silence and solitude.

My proposal is based both on spiritual and practical considerations. What we encounter in silence is ourselves. Henri Nouwen writes:

> "In solitude I get rid of my scaffoldings: no friends to talk to, no telephone calls to make, no meetings to attend, no music to entertain me, no books to distract me, just me - naked, vulnerable, weak, broken, sinful - everything in me wants to run to my friends, my work, and my distractions so that I can forget my nothingness." (Henri Nouwen, Solitude and the Contemporary Ministry in Sojourners)

I have an idea that we meet our own mortality in silence and that we would rather not do that. I have an idea that at the heart of it all, our frantic busyness and incessant noise and persistent openness - are simply our way of denying our mortality. Comedian Richard Pryor was nearly killed when his "free-basing" apparatus blew up. He ran and ran, all his clothes on fire, because, he said, "I knew that as long as I was running I was still alive and I thought if I stopped I will die."

We do that, too... keep running. But what you can run away from is your own soul, your own truest, deepest self.

There are practical considerations. The wilderness is a creative place. I think we have experienced, perhaps by accident, the creativity of solitude. We have had the experience of working at a problem, struggling at our desk, and when we pull back, withdraw from the intensity of the struggle, of stumbling into the solution, almost as if by magic. Creative energy is released when we step back. Working on the problem produces enough stress to inhibit the very creativity the problem requires. All those people jogging in Lincoln Park are not only helping their cardio-vascular systems, they are also nurturing their spirits - and, along the way, doing a fair amount of creative problem-solving. I miss mowing the lawn because I always outlined sermons pushing the mower. Albert Einstein got his best ideas while shaving.

Rilke 2 Solitudes

We know, or should know, the creative potential of silence and solitude in our relationships. Good relationships include space and time for aloneness, separation, privacy, silence. Good relationships provide for each to be alone.

Sometimes love means keeping the silence. Sometimes speaking makes trivial what needs to be profound. A good friend of mine is critical of ministers who "try to make sense of something that is inherently mystical, try to say what they do not know." If you have ever tried to say something to someone whose dear love has just died, you know what that means. Or if you have tried to share someone's ecstacy - you know how inadequate words are. You know - if you have had wisdom and courage to be silent that there is a ministry of presence more eloquent and more helpful than speaking.

The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. So, I believe, for the purpose of helping us with our own spiritual growth, God leads us into seasons of silence.

We need silence in order to hear. The inadequacy of televised religion is, finally, that there is no silence. No space. I learned about that from an artist friend of mine. I had seen an exhibit of Henry Moore sculpture. Moore, you know, was famous for those abstract, reclining figures. "Tell me about them...help me understand" I asked my artist friend who painted and sculpted. "Pay attention to the spaces" he said. One way to look at sculpture, particularly Moore's, is to see the spaces first, to think in terms of the artist working first of all with the empty places. And then I remembered that in great music the rests are important...that Sir Georg Solti devotes as much, if not more, of his genius to spaces in the music as he does to the sounds.

We need silence in order to hear. God, after all, someone said recently, isn't talking all the time. In order to hear the Word we have to live a while in the silence. It is there that we recover something most of us are in danger of losing, namely our own soul. It is there that we rediscover a dimension of our selves that many of us don't even know exists: a spirituality, a depth, a profundity that is a beautiful part of who we are and who we can be.

In the silence we can pray - but in a new way: not the discursive Presbyterian lectures we ordinarily deliver to God, telling God about our theological insights, our social concerns and political agendas, but the honest praying of the soul. "God help me! Jesus save me! Lord, be with me!"

The promise is that the Angels come. After the wilderness struggle: after the time of temptation and silent decision making, the angels came and ministered to him, St. Matthew reports. That's the promise - the angels. The messengers. The bearers of the Good News.

And they do...sometimes mystically, when we know in the silence, the indescribable presence of God.

Sometimes the angels minister to us when we allow ourselves to be led into some wilderness, some quiet time and space: on the beach at sunrise, or perhaps here in the sanctuary or late at night listening once more to the mysterious truth of a Mozart Requiem or in the middle of the afternoon when you allow yourself to be led into the Museum and stand before the unearthly beauty of great art. And sometimes the angels come and they are simply the people we know, who come into our solitude with love and affirmation and hope, those dearest ones who respect our solitude but will be with us when our needs are most urgent: who remind us that we matter, and are cared for and needed and loved, and whose very presence becomes for us the bearer of that other, greater mystery, that God cares and loves us and will be with us forever. That's what an angel is - a messenger, a bearer of the Good News.

Have the angels come for you? May I presume to urge you, whoever you are, however busy your life is, wherever you happen to be on the way, to step back from life: to know that God's Spirit leads us into the wilderness: to welcome that opportunity: to allow it by scheduling it: to take time and to make the place.

You know that to take Jesus Christ seriously is to be radically involved in the life of the world. You know that the purpose of the enterprise is not a new monasticism and that our conclusion is that the desert fathers got it wrong and went too far. But - may I remind you - and myself - that God calls us, as well, to be alone. God calls us to step back from life on occasion, to sort it all out, to see where we've been and where we're going, to rearrange some priorities and make some new plans,

but primarily to rediscover our own self, to recover our own soul, to encounter the God who is always there for us. May I propose that we not fail to be where the angels can find us? Amen.

Holy God, slow us down. Silence in us any voice but your own. Quiet us long enough so we can hear the silence out of which your Word is spoken. In the days of Lent, give us courage to go into a wilderness, to contend with temptation, to affirm our doubts and anxieties, to be open and honest with ourselves and with you. And then, God of grace and mercy, be with us. Strengthen us, enliven us, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.